

Tim DeLaughter and the Boundary of Spectacle

The traditional symphony is a highly formal event. Musicians, in formal clothes, sit in a carefully-designed arrangement high above the audience who (also usually in formal clothes) sits in seats and applauds at formally-appropriate moments (recall the odd paradox of most of the audience unsure when to clap; is it the end of the piece or just the end of the movement?). The music performed is also often formal, classical music, like fine art generally, typically signifying something a cut above everyday life.

This is challenged somewhat by things like the Boston Pops, a symphony who, for the 4th of July, performed “Sweet Caroline” with Neil Diamond to a crowd of people sitting on towels on the lawn waving flags. But, even so, the main feeling was of people crowding around to see something spectacular — *look, it's Neil Diamond!*

The sense was rather different when, wandering past techs and grips, Tim DeLaughter, wearing the dingiest of street clothes, climbed over a forest of cables to the microphone and begun talking about how his father used to beat him for imitating Neil Diamond. *Look, it's him!* was thoroughly tempered with *Who is this guy?*

“So, you know, I would say things like *(Neil Diamond voice:) Please pass the potatoes! I'm so very hungry!* [pats his stomach] and he'd say *Don't you dare do that again* and bitchslap me [mimes bitchslapping] and of course I'd do it again and again.”

And so the audience was throughly puzzled by the time he, rather casually, dropped in the line “Let me bring out the band” and the couple dozen members wandered out onto the stage, also in street clothes. But soon the lights faded and Tim grabbed the microphone and in a burst of light and music, they launched into a rousing version of “Sweet Caroline.”

Tim pranced on stage like no one you've ever seen and the audience bounced up and down and sung along with enthusiasm, but in a throughly confused manner. No one was quite sure how seriously to take a disheveled-looking bunch of dancers, violinists, trumpeters, and harpists led by a guy in street clothes prancing around doing his best imitation of Neil Diamond. (Although, God, nothing can top the chorus girls flicking their hair in tune with “Live and Let Die.”)

A rock band is a special kind of spectacle all on its own — think of Beatlesmania, for example, or how “rock star” is a generalized term for a special kind of awe-inspiring celebrity — and Tim did everything he could to both heighten this sense and demolish it. They'd launch into furious imposing rock songs and the audience would scream and reach toward them, but then the rock would fade down into a quieter symphonic bridge section and Tim would sit down on the stage and chat casually with someone in the front row, while still playing the bridge's main repeating theme on his guitar.

All the usual audience-musician relations were subverted. Musicians often point their mic at the crowd to inspire them to scream the key line in a chorus. Tim, in the middle of a verse, would bend down and point the microphone in a fan's face and let them sing it. And while some musicians “bodysurf” on the crowd's hands, while he sang about being “under the ocean”, Tim literally lay down on the beer-drenched sticky floor and crawled between their legs.

The tension was only heightened in the second act, when the band appeared in their famous white robes, but approached the stage by walking through the audience, saying hi to everyone and hugging like old friends. Tim frequently jumped down into the audience and hugged people in the middle of singing, the microphone in one hand reaching around their back to meet his face on the other side.

The fundamental tension of celebrity is appearing to the world as someone superhuman — achiever of great deeds, seen only in airbrushed photos and on giant screens, known by vastly more people than they themselves know — while still, at base, being a human like everyone else, the kind of person who goes down the street to get a sandwich and chats with people on the subway and all the other humdrum pieces of daily life. It's an odd contradiction and never have I seen it presented better than watching the Polyphonic Spree on stage last night.

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